

Narrative by Owen Burdick

It was my Birthday (September 11th) and I was on the number 4 train commuting down to Trinity Church when an announcement came over the loudspeaker that we would be bypassing Fulton Street station due to falling debris from the World Trade Center. A chef from the Marriott Hotel nearby had boarded the train up at Brooklyn Bridge in an attempt to get home. He told us that a plane had hit one of the towers. Figuring that it was a Cessna or other small craft that had simply gone out of control, we all exited the train at Wall Street expecting to see a couple of smashed windows.

The devastation took everyone's breath away as one by one we climbed the stairs to the street level. The entire upper floors were engulfed in flames, smoke billowing out in all directions, pieces of metal and glass falling to the ground below. A bunch of us watched horrified as a second jet sliced through the second tower. Up until that point we figured, or wanted to believe, that this was a commercial liner gone out of control on its way up the Hudson to La Guardia airport. The second explosion instantly confirmed our worst nightmare: this was the terrorist attack which, ever since the first bombing in 1993, we half expected but prayed would never happen.

The second plane, as I'm sure you've seen from the countless television replays, didn't simply hit the building, it exploded through it. The image was a scene out of the movie "Die Hard," and the ensuing fireball and smoke, and the roar of the explosion were terrifying. The events sent many people into the church to pray and cry and just get away from the horror. Father Stuart Hoke read psalms and lead us in prayer; I was called into service to play a couple of hymns.

But after a while (being a city kid after all, from 105th Street) I said, "OK, we've praised the Lord enough; it's time to get the hell outta here!" The hijackers had aimed their "flying bombs" so as to take out a corner and an entire side of each tower. I had a horrible feeling

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that the towers could fall, and knew that Trinity would be well within the reach of those toppling giants.

A verger, David Wright, and I heard a horrendous noise and ran to the back door of the church to see what was happening. With a clear view of the South Tower, we watched as the building began to collapse. David screamed “Oh, my God!” and it marked the first time I was truly afraid. It really looked as if, from three blocks away—only two football fields—we were going to be consumed. The sound of the crushing metal, the thousands of splintering panes of glass, the deafening explosion, people falling or jumping from the building as it crumbled—it was a maelstrom, and I don't think I've ever used that word before in my life. I just keep seeing it and hearing it over and over.

Newtonian physics and gravity being what they are, the tower fell straight down like a giant accordion. An earthquake shook the ground beneath us and broke windows across the street in the Trinity Office building but somehow the stained glass of Trinity remained intact. The moments immediately following were terrifying—David and I no sooner closed the door when tons of debris started to fly down the street and blanketed the church and the graveyard next to us. Smoke and a fine ash-like pumice came through the closed windows and the sky turned completely black.

The fifteen or so people in the church were divided as to where the best place to seek shelter would be. Our security guard wanted us to move to the basement and crypt area but, being claustrophobic, I wasn't about to go “down” anywhere. I figured (and our Vergers agreed) that we should stay put since we had a column of breathable air in the nave of the church, bottled water from the choir room and towels from the sacristy to cover our mouths and faces from the smoke.

Our Vicar, John Howard, and his wife, Marie, had already headed South to the Ferry terminal before the first building collapsed. Fr. Hoke, who had lead the prayers had also

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left the church. It was kind of odd that there was no priest in the church, but I understand many of them were busy across the street evacuating the pre-school.

After a short time, the second building (the North Tower) collapsed. The sound and wreckage were the same, and again the ground shook and the sky turned black. More debris fell on the church and still more smoke started pouring in through the leading of the stained glass windows. We sat tight and figured once the dust settled—literally—we would try to make it to the East River or head South to the ferry terminal.

In about an hour, a ray of sun was visible through the windows. The only clear pane of glass in the church is one in my office, and we went up to take a look. The only people on the street were fire fighters wearing gas masks. Occasionally, you could see civilians running for cover with rags covering their mouths. We figured it was time to move out and David Wright bravely stayed behind to secure the church.

We opened the doors and tentatively walked into pandemonium. I was very grateful to have the company of Julie Liston, a soprano in the Trinity Choir. Julie had been late for work and would have been working on one of the upper floors of the North Tower had she been on time. But she saw the inferno caused by the first plane crash and had the good sense to stay away. Not knowing where to turn, and feeling the same sense of helplessness that we all shared, she walked down to Trinity. I was so happy to see a familiar face. Needless to say, if she'd been on time, she'd be dead.

David Jette, the Head Verger, went South to the Ferry to try to get a boat to his home on Staten Island. Julie and I ran into Melvin Fulton from the third floor clergy office who was trying to get home to Brooklyn. The rest of the fifteen or so folks who had taken refuge in the church all wished each other well and we went our separate ways.

Julie and I both needed to head North; she to Inwood and I needed to get to Connecticut. Having run a marathon in the past, I knew that if I could run 26.2 miles, I could certainly walk 35 to my house if I had to. No subways or buses were running, of course. There

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was no running water, no electricity. The city around us was dead. And it was strangely quiet. The eight to ten inches of ash and debris on the ground had the same effect as a snowstorm; all sound was deadened or muffled.

As we walked across Broadway in front of the church and looked uptown, you could see nothing but blackness in the sky, debris everywhere. We stepped over a sea of wallets and brief cases, single shoes and smoldering faxes—all “floating” within a dull white foot-high ocean of vaporized wallboard and glass. If anyone was outside and within a block or two of those buildings as they fell, I felt certain they would have suffocated; we had trouble breathing inside the church.

So, with wet towels around our necks and over our mouths, we started walking. We ran into a fireman who was obviously dazed and injured. He told us that he had been blown half a block down the street and managed, somehow, to grab hold of a fence which saved his life. He said that five of his fellow firefighters—five of his buddies—had been blown away and turned into “charcoal.”

We headed East. All I wanted to do is get to the East River where we could breathe. Julie and I made it to the river and looked back in disbelief. A cloud, hundreds of feet tall and wide had engulfed the financial district and was not moving. We had been there. We had been at “ground zero” and survived—we'd be OK.

We walked up to Grand Central where Julie and I parted company. She braved the hoards of people trying to get home to Westchester and Connecticut. Since I had not been able to get word to anyone—phone service, land or cell, was impossible—I felt I needed to walk up to St. Thomas Choir School to see my son John and let him know I was alright.

As I entered the school and saw the kids in his class, they began to laugh; I was, after all, covered in white ash, my pants and shirt were soiled with debris, and my hair was white

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with ash. The laughter quickly stopped as they realized where I had been. My son rushed to hug me, and I lost it. It finally hit me: I was alive!

I made a couple of phone calls and then walked to New York Hospital to try to give blood or help volunteer. As I'm sure you've seen on the news coverage, they turned everyone away. Aside from the earliest burn victims and cuts and abrasion victims who were, for the most part, taken to St. Vincent's trauma center, there were no patients. Today, 72 hours later, there are still none. Doctors from all over the country are waiting around emergency rooms shooting paper clips at each other, going stir crazy. There is nothing to do. There are as yet no survivors.

I finally made my way to Grand Central which, by 7:00 PM, was a ghost town. I caught a train and was glad to be home. I woke up in my clothes; ash still covered my shoes.

September 11th is my birthday. I have decided in the future, rather than celebrating on 9-11, to celebrate on 11-9, November 9th—I'm now a Scorpio! Seriously, I can't begin to express the gratitude I feel for the real birthday present I received: your e-mail, your concern, and the concern of so many friends.

The ninety-plus calls and emails I have received from all over the world have been the most moving and powerful outpouring of love I have ever felt. I'm only sorry I could not answer yours more quickly. I was kind of numb yesterday and, like the rest of us, was riveted to the tube all day. But today, I've been on the phone constantly.

The folks who know about such things have posted eleven symptoms of "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" or some such name. I must admit to demonstrating 10 out of 11. The worst is the recurring visions of that building coming down.

Please pray for the victims and their families. Please know also that I'm fine, and stir crazy myself at not being able to do anything: we can't get near the church. They're turning volunteers away, figuring that if you don't know what you're doing, you could pull a brick

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and fifty more could come tumbling down. But I feel like I can't wait to get back and help clean up the mess.

God's blessings on us all.